

2003 Fishing Outlook - Fine Fishing Ahead, Despite Low Water in Some Places

By Ron Wilson

Like the newly-minted-nickel coloration of a rainbow trout, the forecast for the 2003 fishing season is bright for much of the state.

Certainly, there are concerns about drought, and all those things that go along with it – lower lake elevations, exposed spawning habitat, decline in fish food, and so on. But scientists are trusting in a turn in precipitation to refill North Dakota fisheries as fast as they declined.

“I think the fishing is going to be absolutely great this season,” said Terry Steinwand, fisheries chief for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. “The silver lining in a black cloud out there is that there is going to be the same number of fish in smaller bodies of water – and the fish are going to be hungry.”

With fisheries on the Northern Plains, there are going to be times of up and times of down, Steinwand said.

“We’re not in a low point right now,” he said. “If we get the water back, we’re going to be in better shape. That’s the best scenario – getting water back.”

When those lakes that are low refill, exposed vegetation will become inundated, creating spawning habitat, places for young-of-the-year fish to hide, while providing a nutrient-rich injection for the entire food chain.

“If you look back over the last five to eight years, the theme has been pretty upbeat because we’ve had the water,” said Greg Power, Department fish management/research section leader. “But given the drought, there are some concerns in some parts of the state.”

In southwest North Dakota, the most hard-hit by drought, some fisheries have been lost. And waters south of Highway 200 are down 3-5 five feet from 2001, opening the door to possible summer and winterkill.

“But we still have some pretty good depths in those (lakes) south of 200,” Steinwand said. “They can come back pretty quickly.”

While frustrating to ice fishermen, a winter fishing season across the state that can be described as erratic, at best, will mean good things to open-water anglers.

“You’d hear of a few good days of ice-fishing, then it would be a dead sea for a few days,” Steinwand said. “So, fish harvest, according to the sporadic fishing reports, was not an issue this winter. The fish are still out there.”

In late February, Steinwand said the threat of winterkill in many North Dakota fisheries was low. Meaning: more fish would be around to procreate in the spring and bite

baits cast overboard by open-water anglers this season.

“Normally, by mid-February, you’re starting to see the signs of a long winter showing up,” he said. “But that hasn’t been the case.”

For the angler open to pursuing non-headliner species, opportunities are out there.

“If there is one theme this season, it’s a theme of diverse opportunities,” Power said. “We have some very good largemouth and smallmouth bass opportunities in North Dakota, for example, which are the result of stockings in the early and mid-1990s.”

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Left: Game and Fish Department fisheries managers predict that anglers will get plenty of use out of their fishing nets this season despite the forecast of a continued decline in water levels on some fisheries. Anglers fishing on those waters hurt by a lack of precipitation will be fishing for the same number of fish, but in smaller bodies of water

Interest in bass fishing in the state is not intense, which means healthy populations not often bothered by anglers. Sweet Briar Dam in Morton County, Raleigh Reservoir in Grant County, and McDowell Dam in Burleigh County are three examples, Power said, of waters with desirable bass populations.

"Most anglers will still seek out walleye and walleye populations are pretty good, especially in the central and northern third of the state," he said. "But the bass are pretty much left alone."

Northern pike fishing this season could be something that anglers look back on and smile, as at least one tremendous year-class of predators is all grown up.

"The 1994 year-class of pike in the state was historical, unbelievable," Power said.

These fish are 9 years old now, and, as the imaginative angler might envision, they're big enough to eat the neighbor's lap dog.

"Some of these pike in the Missouri River System are approaching the 20-pound size," Power said. "I wouldn't be surprised to hear this spring about some trophy pike fishing."

And with the forecast of even lower water levels on Lake Sakakawea, there won't be a shortage of shoreline for the

spring northern pike angler to access.

"Lake levels are a real concern," Power said. "Yet, we do expect the fishing to be really good in Sakakawea this year."

This is so for a couple of reasons. First, since a third of the volume of Sakakawea has been lost, fish will be concentrated into less water.

"But more importantly – and sadly – rainbow smelt are taking a hit and their numbers are down," Power said. "Because of this, the stomachs of walleye, sauger, pike and salmon, of which the lake has good populations, won't be full. And they're going to be hungry."

Rainbow smelt are the main forage for game fish in Lake Sakakawea. Department biologists have examined stomach contents of more than 7,500 fish in the last 18 years, and found smelt make up more than 90 percent of what walleye and salmon eat.

Lower lake levels could also negatively influence smelt and walleye spawning efforts this spring, in part because much of the spawning habitat – silt-free gravel, rock and cobble – will likely be high and dry.

Poor runoff, and a falling Lake Sakakawea could also make matters worse, by exposing smelt eggs already

deposited in shallow water.

Department studies on Sakakawea have shown that nearly 96 percent of smelt eggs are dumped in 12 inches of water or less, and even minor declines in lake levels during spawning and incubation can greatly reduce production. The result is weak, or missing, smelt year-classes that affect the fishery for several years.

"Natural reproduction in Sakakawea for both smelt and walleye could be tough this year," Power said.

Northwest North Dakota

Drought is not a major concern for fisheries in the northwest portion of the state, as most waters are holding at decent levels, said Fred Ryckman, Department district fisheries biologist in Williston.

There are a few exceptions, as Tioga and McLeod reservoirs in Williams County need a shot of water.

"Other than that, we're in pretty good shape," Ryckman said. "The lakes have been holding their own, some could use some runoff and they're going to get a little. We did have some snow this winter and expect to have some runoff this spring."

Fish populations are up, for the most part, in northwest North Dakota. Northern pike are doing especially well.

"A jewel in the northwest, in terms of good fish populations, is Northgate Dam," Ryckman said.

The Burke County fishery is home to walleye, largemouth and smallmouth bass, bluegill, trout, crappie – and few, if any, undesirable species that can quickly tarnish a good fishery.

"Northgate is a shining example of what a fishery can become without the junk, the undesirable species like bullheads or suckers," Ryckman said.

Southwest North Dakota

Fisheries in the southwest have been hit hard by drought.

"As you know, water levels are very low," said Emil Berard, Department western district supervisor in Dickinson. "We lost a dozen lakes over the last two years and don't know how many more we'll lose this year."

Some of the best fishing opportunities lie in Heart Butte Reservoir (Lake Tschida) and Raleigh Reservoir, both in Grant County, Nygren Dam in Morton County, and North Lemmon in Adams County.

"And Bowman-Haley Dam (Bowman County), which is down about five feet, should have good fishing in it," Berard said.

The Department will continue to stock fisheries in the southwest, Berard said, in

Photo Omitted

hopes that spring and summer rains refill them.

"We hope for a comeback ... but we know it's going to be slow," he said.

Central North Dakota

The forecast for fishing on the Missouri River System is good, maybe even better than that.

"The fish will be concentrated and hungry because the low water will cause a problem with the forage base," said Jeff Hendrickson, Department central district supervisor in Riverdale. "But the access is going to be difficult."

At normal operation levels, Lake Sakakawea has about 40 useable boat ramps in 36 public access areas. But as lake levels fall, getting boats into the water becomes problematic, and the number of useable ramps declines.

"Access is going to be a major problem, but we are going to be working on it," Hendrickson said. "People are going to have to be patient."

Hendrickson cautions anglers that while low lakes levels aren't good news, it isn't the end of Sakakawea as we know it.

"The whole fishery just isn't going to die," he said. "The fish will have to turn to other species for forage. Walleye are pretty adaptable ... they'll eat other stuff. They're going to be a little skinnier, a little hungrier, and should bite pretty good."

The theme this summer on Sakakawea, he said is: "If you can get out on the lake, you can catch 'em."

Away from Sakakawea, fisheries in the central portion of the state are full of water, or close to it, Hendrickson said. Like West Park Lake, East Park Lake, Lake Audubon, Brekken Lake and Holmes Lake, all McLean County.

"If people sneak off to some of these other lakes, they're going to find the fishing pretty good," he said.

The forecast is also good for spring walleye fishing on the Missouri River, but access to the river in places could be a challenge.

Southeast North Dakota

Unless there was a late turnaround in the ice-fishing season in the southeast, there should be plenty of fish making it to the open-water season.

"In terms of ice-fishing harvest, most of the waters were not damaged at all," said Gene Van Eeckhout, Department district fisheries biologist in Jamestown.

And few, if any, fish are expected to be lost to winterkill.

"We may be surprised come ice-out, but if there is any winterkill, I don't expect it to be bad," he said.

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Van Eeckhout said the word to anglers is that the mid-sized reservoirs – Jamestown Reservoir, Pipestem Dam and Lake Ashtabula – are good day in and day out. And that advice shouldn't be any different this season.

"I think the walleye population in all three will be OK," he said.

But northern pike numbers might be down a bit.

One of the better age classes of walleye – the 1999 progeny – is one anglers should watch out for in Jamestown Reservoir, Van Eeckhout said.

"They made 14 inches last summer, and the potential for a good harvest is there for this summer," he said. "Otherwise, in terms of other good year-classes, it's sort of hit and miss on those other lakes."

Northeast North Dakota

The walleye population in Devils Lake is doing great, with average-sized fish starting to get longer. Department netting surveys have shown a lot of walleye from 13-18 inches.

"The kind of fish that are excellent to carve up for the table," said Randy Hiltner, Department district fisheries biologist in Devils Lake. "That's not to say we don't have larger walleye, because we do. It's just that there are fewer of them than the younger fish."

June has become one of the hot months to fish Devils Lake, so mark your calendars. In June of 2001, Hiltner said anglers put in more than 300,000 hours on the lake.

"In late May and June there is a big push because there is good walleye, white bass and northern pike fishing in the shallows," he said. "You just never know what you're going to catch when you run a crankbait through shallow water at that time."

Water levels in northeast North Dakota aren't a concern, Hiltner said.

"Some of our big sloughs are now lakes, and there is some excellent pike fishing," he said.

There are also many reservoirs in the northeast, Hiltner said, that are 100 to 300 acres in size – from Whitman Dam in Nelson County to Mt. Carmel Dam in Cavalier County – that don't get much fishing pressure, but produce a lot of fish.

He also recommends fishing in the Turtle Mountains, like at Dion and Gravel lakes in Rolette County, for a change in scenery.

"There are a lot of places to try and explore," he said.

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Sakakawea, Oahe Access Outlook

By Ron Wilson

At Lake Sakakawea early this spring, the number of useable boat ramps will outnumber the angler's daily walleye limit of five fish – but not by much.

"At ice-out, we're probably going to only have a handful, about a half-dozen, of truly useable boat ramps," said Bob Frohlich, Game and Fish Department fisheries development coordinator. "Others will be high and dry, silted in, or have steep drop offs at the bottom ends."

During times of average water levels – 1,830 to 1,854 feet above mean sea level – Sakakawea has about 40 useable boat ramps in 36 recreation sites. But as water levels fall below 1,830 msl, access to one of the best walleye fisheries on the Northern Plains becomes more difficult.

Sakakawea was forecast to enter spring at 1,819 msl, just four feet higher than the all-time low, due to drought – poor runoff from both mountains and plains – and an outdated U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cookbook for managing the Missouri River System.

"We are working with the corps, other agencies, sportsmen's clubs, resorts, park boards, and planning how to complete work to make more ramps useable," Frohlich said.

The hope, after silt is removed from ramps inundated for years, and other adjustments are made, is to have 24-26 ramps on Sakakawea open to boaters by early summer.

But if corps forecasts hold true and Sakakawea continues to fall, Frohlich expects some ramps to be lost by the end of August, dropping the number of useable ramps to about 18.

Even though the numbers don't seem that bad, the quality of the facilities will be greatly diminished, he said.

During years of average water conditions, Sakakawea boaters and anglers are served with large, multilane concrete boat ramps, serviced by paved access roads with all the amenities, like courtesy docks and fish cleaning stations.

"This year, from ice-out to fall, those facilities are going to be narrow, single-lane, concrete plank ... and anglers will have to tow their boats across trails and a boggy lake bed in some places," Frohlich said.

On Lake Oahe, south of Bismarck, in times of low water the picture isn't any better. Based on corps predictions, Frohlich said boat access to the lake in North Dakota will likely not exist south of the Fort Rice area this fishing season.

It's difficult to provide a list of boat ramps that will be useable on Sakakawea this summer, since bottom elevations of many low-water ramps were taken a decade ago, and many have silted in after years of being covered in water.

"Just because a ramp shows up as being useable on a piece of paper, doesn't mean it really is," Frohlich said. "In many cases, even though the bottom elevation indicates that a ramp should be useable, it isn't."

Freeing a ramp of years of silt doesn't always solve the problem of access, he said, as the bay has silted-in, too. Readers who want current information on Missouri River System boat ramps can access the Game and Fish Department's website at discovernd.com/gnf.

Like beached boats waiting for high tide, some Missouri River System ramps are waiting for water levels to return to normal. In the meantime, agencies and organizations are developing alternative sites where anglers and boaters can access lakes Sakakawea and Oahe.



Craig Bihle